DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 322 500 CS 212 421

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TITLE "What in My World/the World Is Going on?": A Pragmatic-Eclectic Approach toward Rhetoric and Literature for the Composition Student.
PUB DATE 11 Jul 90
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Conference on Rhetoric and the Teaching of Writing (Indiana, PA, July 10-11, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audience Awareness; Critical Thinking; *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; Rhetoric; Rhetorical Theory; Teaching Methods; *Writing Instruction; Writing Processes; *Writing Strategies; Writing Teachers
IDENTIFIERS Academic Discourse Communities; *Voice (Rhetoric); Writing Contexts; Writing Models

ABSTRACT

Writing teachers should employ a pragmatic-eclectic approach to help freshman students become acquainted with as many writing models as possible. To privilege one model over the many others is to ignore the student's need for self- and world-discovery. The composition classroom has become the current center of critical reading and thinking skills, and writing teachers need to make the students the center of the writing experience. Composition students should be able to ask and answer, "What in my/the world is going on?" Before student voices become institutionalized, they should experiment with writing groups, discovering what has become known as "modern rhetoric." Students can explore possibilities in the important areas of audience and the nature of literacy, and decide what writing models work for them. However, after their initial experimentation with broader views of process, audience, and literacy, students need to understand the political realities of academic writing: the ability to argue a point--that is, to support a position with research--and the ability to present facts clearly. One important way to help students to adjust to a more prescriptive model is to discuss the narrower views of audience and literacy in academic writing. Another way is to point out that most academic writing always has been collaborative, in which people "talk" through the articles they find in the research process. This point of view introduces students to structures required by other liberal arts courses. (KEH)

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"What in my world/the world is going on?": A Pragmatic-Eclectic Approach toward Rhetoric and Literature for the Composition Student

By

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July 11, 1990

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"What in my world/the world is going on?": A Pragmatic-Eclectic Approach toward Rhetoric and Literature for the Composition Student

Recently there has been much discussion on how English departments should conceive Freshman Composition: is it an introduction to literary study; is it the product of something called "traditional" or "modern" rhetoric; is it none or is it all of these? Jay Robinson suggests part of the difficulty in defining composition has to do with a dominant perception of literacy as "an easy familiarity with a certain body of texts." Robinson adds that there should be no literature in composition because the two operate as different "currencies"--not two sides of the same coin (249). In their essay "Literature in the Composition Class: The Case Against," Barbara and Francis Lide point out that because of declining enrollments in literature classes, composition is too often seen as "the 'last chance' to interest students in literature" (109).

The debate as I've described it so far might leave us thinking that the struggle is between Literature People and Composition People, but this is only partially true. The nature of composition, as most of us already know, is much more complex: to add to the colorful discussion are the traditional rhetoricians and the "new" or modern rhetoricians. Unfortunately, to introduce these two groups is to introduce another false and unnecessary dichotomy. Given this binary

opposition, many of us might be asking, "Do we have to get rid of the old to make room for the new?"

To make this debate even more confusing is the issue of composition as the major way to service the writing needs of the academy. John Gage points out in "Freshman English: In Whose Service?" that it is naive for composition teachers to think Freshman English can service the institution by finding the "right" textbooks: Gage suggests that we need to grasp "the difference between writing about such disciplines and writing in them" (470). However, the ironic reality is that while these other "disciplines" don't want much, if anything, to do with writing, their documents of passage, such as master's theses and doctoral dissertations, demand vital critical thinking skills. It seems--for the time being--the composition classroom is the default location in which students are to learn writing in the academy. If this is so, Gage argues, then composition teachers must help to provide what he calls "critical tools" to help students inquire into the "relationship between the conclusions of what they read and the cases actually made for them" (473).

So if the composition classroom is the current center of critical reading and thinking skills--as it seems to be--we writing teachers need to make our students the center of the writing experience. This means the composition classroom should be a location for self-discovery and world-discovery: students should be able to ask and answer, "What in my/the world is going on?" Before student voices become too "institutionalized"--and

they will to some degree--they should experiment with writing groups, discovering what has become known as "modern rhetoric." However, in limited fashion, the process of world-discovery should include how the politics of the academy operate: this does mean helping students to become aware of certain "traditional" and rather generic rhetorical structures such as argumentation and exposition. Additionally, later in a writing course what is so unreasonable about one research paper and one literary analysis assignment--both of which are structures required by other courses liberal-arts students must take? Using what I call the pragmatic-eclectic approach, we writing teachers should help our freshman students to become acquainted with as many writing models as possible: to privilege one model over the many others is to ignore a student's need for self- and world-discovery.

In Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing, C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon make the powerfully important suggestion that writing teachers need to be "philosophical" about the teaching of composition: we need to keep asking ourselves why we do what we do (2). We writing teachers need to be honest with our students about conveying our writing philosophies and the traditions associated with them. James Berlin, in "Contemporary Composition: The Major Pedagogical Theories," has helped in this regard by mapping the four pedagogical approaches writing teachers use to teach composition today. Without getting unnecessarily bogged down in definition,

we should note quickly how different these groups are as they attempt to locate how humans process "truth":

1. The Classicists insist "truth" is produced by reason.
2. The Current-Traditionalists offer the use of accepted forms to convey the "truth."
3. The Expressionists encourage the use of reader-response techniques because the self is the center of "truth."
4. The New Rhetoricians suggest that "truth" is located within the group in which people find themselves.

To accept only one of the models above seems epistomologically unrealistic: so in the spirit of harmony in order to avoid that old malady, "hardening of the categories," I would like to advocate one general approach to writing that provides the most multiple possibilities for the majority of writing students--I'll call it the pragmatic-eclectic approach. Because students deserve the opportunity to decide what writing models work for them and because the politics of the academy demand informed participants, we teachers of composition should be willing to confront these needs honestly (this is the pragmatic component) and from many points of view as possible (the eclectic feature).

Unfortunately, as William Irmscher highlights in "Finding a Comfortable Identity," too often composition serves the purpose of eliminating the "ill-prepared" students rather than helping

them to become better writers (81). On the other hand, many of us composition teachers assume that by their discovering process, "students can write their way out of their ignorance," a possible error in judgment noted by James Reither in "Writing and Knowing: Toward Redefining the Writing Process" (142). For us writing teachers to be pragmatic, therefore, we must make our students aware of the struggle for intellectual power and the politics that accompany this struggle: one such immediate example is the debate between the traditional and modern rhetoricians over the ways in which writers should present their thinking. An apparent pragmatist himself, Kenneth Bruffee agrees that "not to have mastered the normal discourse of a discipline, no matter how many 'facts' or data one may know, is not to be knowledgeable in that discipline" (Reither 143). In addition, to be eclectic and to aid in our students' self- and world-discovery, we writing teachers should seriously consider introducing group writing from the new rhetoricians, argumentation and exposition from the traditional rhetoricians, reader-response from the expressive rhetoricians, and literary criticism from the literary tradition under which many of us have been trained (Don't we still find it meaningful?).

What follows in the balance of this presentation is a rudimentary syllabus: my intent is to suggest some possible ways in which writing instruction should address students' personal and academic needs--not to provide an academic calendar or sequence. To begin with, I think many of us would readily agree

that our freshman students haven't experimented enough with their own rich grasp of language. As Knoblauch and Brannon suggest, our writing students have an innate linguistic competence--"the ability to make and convey meanings through language"--which teachers can merely help to develop (101). With this in mind, we see that modern rhetoricians help us to understand the vital importance of experimentation with and discovery of writing process. In the initial stages of a course called "Freshman Composition," students really should have the freedom to work with other students through collaboration, under an agenda Knoblauch and Brannon call "the students' writing" (104). As James Reither points out, the primary goal of student-centered writing, after all, should be to replace a <u>prescriptive</u> model with a <u>descriptive</u> one (140).

Under the student-centered classroom paradigm, the writing teacher is a "coach" or an "informed responder" (Knoblauch and Brannon 102). This approach suggests the teacher fosters a "safe" environment that allows students to learn the nature of composing in an inductive way--the teacher doesn't supply "ingredients for improved performance" (Knoblauch and Brannon 102). So as Knoblauch and Brannon conceive the collaborative classroom, "composing is a competence that develops through use," which means the atmosphere is accommodating, not authoritarian (104). Given these criteria, we writing teachers have the obligation to sponsor student experimentation with process writing early on as students become initiated to the manifold

notion of composition after reaching college. In addition, the group writing experience will allow students to begin exploring the possibilities in the important areas of audience and the nature of literacy.

However, after their initial experimentation with broader views of process, audience, and literacy, we can't allow our students to underestimate the political realities of academic writing: the ability to argue a point--that is, to support a position with research--and the ability to present facts clearly are recognized rights of passage in many academic disciplines. One important way to help students to adjust to a more prescriptive model is to discuss the narrower views of audience and literacy in academic writing. Another useful way to help our students make the transition from modern rhetoric to traditional rhetoric is to point out, as James Reither has, that most academic writing has always been collaborative (145): in position papers people "talk" to one another through the articles they find in the process called "research." Even further, Reither observes that students need immersion in a discourse community--that is, learning the conventional structures required to belong to a group--because the talking is as important as the knowing (144). If we put our students in "arhetorical situations" too often, they will never learn that it is possible to write out of ignorance within a discipline (Reither 146).

Part of my argument here is that the limited time available for a course called "Freshman Composition" makes it necessary to

be efficient: some forms like the research paper must be introduced because of their widespread use. Writing in "Freshman English: In Whose Service," John Gage suggests that all writing conveys a persuasive intent to some degree (471). He strongly supports the notion that critical reading reveals the means by which information is persuasive, as well as the ways we inquire into and discover knowledge (471-72). Gage's conclusion is that writing teachers should introduce research projects in class because our students deserve the chance to change their thinking on an issue "if the reasons they find are compelling enough" (473). I agree there is a restrictive nature to a more traditional form of rhetoric such as the research paper, but if Freshman English must be of service to the students and the academy, some few traditional forms must be introduced to help students function within their discourse communities.

For yet another view of process, audience, and literacy, composition students really should have the opportunity to interact with imaginative literature. However, in their article "Literature in the Composition Class: The Case Against," Barbara and Francis Lide provide their main objection to the pervasive use of literature in composition: because essays do not fall within the realm of imaginative literature, they argue, literature provides a bad model for persuasive discourse--it does not reinforce the demands of academic writing (110-111). To make their argument compelling, the Lides highlight the three dominant varieties of literature within composition: literature

with a few compositions on the side; the themes model (which enjoys classical status); and the reader-response model. Arguing for the use of literature in composition, Bruce Petersen indicates, in "A Unified Model of Reading, Interpretation, and Composition," that the research of James Britton and Linda Flower in composition and David Bleich and Louise Rosenblatt in reading support a unified composition-literature theory: "all four argue that our first approach to knowing is founded on a personal and often affective base" (463).

Allowing what the Lides argue--that imaginative literature is not academically persuasive in nature--and what Petersen argues--that knowing is initially personal--still leaves plenty of room to use literature in the composition classroom. Writing students should have the opportunity to address literature in a way that doesn't insist on the imitation of literature in persuasive discourse or demand the analytical skills required for literary criticism (although perhaps the latter could follow at some point in the academic year). To make a personal identification with another author's response to the world encourages a "connected knowing" that will offer students a more individual model of learning than that of the group writing model or the traditional research model described above. Again, to be pragmatic-eclectic writing teachers we should be supportive of self-discovery and world-discovery, especially in looking for ways in which the two interact in complementary fashion.

Before leaving the necessary role of literature in the

composition classroom, I'd like to reflect briefly on the backgrounds of most of us composition teachers. As we are very willing to admit, we writing teachers have generally been trained in a field known as "literary criticism." At various stages in our academic careers we learned that imaginative literature "talked" to us in many different ways: I think we deeply hope our students have also experienced some powerful connections with some form of imaginative literature. Although I agree with Jay Robinson that we shouldn't confuse literature with literacy (259), to avoid the one significant aspect of literacy that has touched many of us so deeply--literary criticism--is to ignore sharing yet another writing model that some of our students might wish to pursue farther than that "Survey of Literature" course often required for graduation.

Whether or not it should be, the teaching of writing falls our lot in the academy--partly because English departments jealously protect it and partly because other "disciplines" don't want to acknowledge their participation in a larger view of literacy. Bearing this reality in mind, we writing teachers have the difficult task of introducing freshman students to that broad field known as "Freshman Composition" and its manifold interpretations. To claim composition is simply an introduction to literature, traditional rhetoric, or modern rhetoric is to underestimate its possibilities severely. If John Gage's suggestion is valid--that we should help our students acquire

the "critical tools" to work within many academic fields--then all of us must admit our task is much too demanding. I sincerely hope this larger-than-life view of our role in the academy receives increasing scrutiny from our colleagues outside of the English department.

However, if the current center of critical reading and thinking skills must be the composition classroom, then we must ever keep our students and their needs--as far as we can conceive these needs--in the center of our attention. I sincerely believe that another way in which we can be philosophical about our teaching is to acknowledge the politics our students must confront when they enter other discourse communities that expect more traditional notions of rhetoric such as argumentation and exposition. Rather than aligning ourselves with one particular pedagogy as Berlin has mapped them, we would really serve our students and the institutions for which we work more effectively if we were more <u>pragmatic-eclectic</u> in our approach to the teaching of writing. To do so would make our classrooms places more conducive to self- and world-discovery because our students would be experimenting with different writing models aiding them in their quest of the interrelated question, "What in my world/the world is going on?"

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